

National Park Service
2014 Environmental Achievement Awards

Winner

NPS CERCLA Response Team, Palmerton Zinc Pile Superfund Site
Appalachian National Scenic Trail

The Palmerton Zinc Pile Superfund Site is a large Superfund complex in and around the town of Palmerton, Pennsylvania, the legacy of more than 80 years of zinc smelting at two plants operated by the New Jersey Zinc Company. Due to the deposition of smelter emissions containing high concentrations of zinc, cadmium, and lead, several thousand acres of forest along the Appalachian National Scenic Trail have been severely impacted.

The National Park Service (NPS) Team became involved in the Palmerton Site a decade ago to ensure that cleanup decisions would address risks to human health and the environment caused by the release of hazardous substances on the Site, and would not impede the mission of the NPS.

NPS worked tirelessly to ensure that planned revegetation efforts (a) were effective on the steep, defoliated, and increasingly unstable slopes at Lehigh Gap; (b) effectively addressed risks to human health and the environment, including rockfall risks to AT hikers and motorists on the highway below; (c) controlled invasive plants during a 10-year revegetation monitoring and adaptive management period; (d) met an aggressive revegetation performance standard to ensure long-term success of native vegetation; and (e) realized the NPS vision of re-establishing an Eastern hardwood forest on this once ravaged landscape.

The team applied NPS-selected seed, fertilizer, and lime on NPS-managed acres and the planting of tens of thousands of trees, shrubs, and grasses, including blight-resistant American chestnut, various oaks, black gum, sumac, chokeberry, and sweet ferns. According to some accounts, this is the largest remediation and re-vegetation project ever undertaken through EPA's Superfund program.

The NPS team also undertook a CERCLA response action at Lehigh Gap to fulfill NPS's obligation to eliminate unacceptable site risks and to manage the Appalachian Trail in a manner that leaves it unimpaired for future generations. Taking such action in the context of EPA-lead action at the larger Palmerton Site that was listed on the National Priorities List was a precedential action requiring close intra-governmental cooperation with USEPA and the U.S. Department of Justice.